

## **Grade 3 - Informational**

### **Ranching in Nebraska**

Nebraska produces more beef than any other state. Today, beef production is the state's biggest industry, but that wasn't always true. Until 1867, Nebraska had very few cattle ranches. The railroads helped make ranching important in Nebraska.

#### **Nebraska's First Ranches**

In 1867, railroad lines were built across Nebraska. Texas ranchers had a lot of cattle, but they didn't have a railroad. How could these ranchers get their beef to markets in the East? They took their cattle overland from Texas to Nebraska—a distance greater than 800 miles! Then, the cattle traveled by train from Nebraska to markets in the East.

In 1868, a man named M. H. Brown bought 800 Texas longhorn cattle to start his own herd. He built a ranch near the North Platte River. The Newman Brothers built a ranch, too, and began raising beef cattle. These two ranches covered several hundred miles. Other ranchers began raising smaller herds in the Niobrara Valley and in Custer County.

Ranchers hired cowhands to watch over the cattle that roamed Nebraska's grasslands. Part of the cowhands' job was to help ranchers prove ownership of their cattle. Each ranch had a special brand, or mark, which the cowhands put on every animal that belonged to that ranch.

Early ranchers were successful because Nebraska is a good place to raise cattle. The animals grazed on thick grasses in the western regions and the Sandhills. By the 1870s, Nebraska was one of the largest beef producing states.

#### **Activities of a Cowhand**

The cowhands spent days at a time on the prairie. They rode horses and slept outdoors in bedrolls. They ate food they could carry with them, such as bread and dried vegetables. Sometimes, they cooked food, such as beans, bacon, or ham, over a fire.

Cowhands' clothing helped protect them from the weather. Every cowhand wore a hat with a wide brim as protection from the sun, rain, and snow. Cowhands also wore bandanas to keep dust out of their mouths and noses. Leather pants called chaps, sturdy boots, and heavy gloves were worn by cowhands. A saddle slicker was a kind of raincoat worn during storms.

#### **Changes in Ranching**

Early ranchers let their cattle graze on public lands. By the 1880s, many settlers

reached Nebraska and began farming. Farmers disliked having herds cross their fields. Farmers and ranchers had to find ways to share the land.

Barbed-wire fences provided a solution to the problem. The sharp spikes on the wire helped farmers by keeping cattle from crossing farmland. Eventually, ranchers used fences to help keep track of their herds. Cowhands spent less time watching over the herds on the prairie and more time repairing fences. Fencing the land brought about changes in ranching.

Ranchers improved their herds by buying Hereford and Angus cattle. These animals produced better beef. Ranchers did not allow these cattle to wander across the prairies and graze on the grasses. These cattle were kept in barns and were fed hay or corn.

### **Ranching Today**

Today ranchers use tractors, trucks, and other machines on their ranches. Cowhands use computers to obtain information about prices and the markets. Some ranchers use helicopters to round up cattle.

In some ways, however, ranching in Nebraska has not changed. Nebraska ranchers work hard to provide the best beef possible to people throughout the United States and other countries

